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FM AMEMBASSY TBILISI
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INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/OSD WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TBILISI 001304

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/10/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [GG](#)
SUBJECT: GEORGIA: NON-PARLIAMENTARY OPPOSITION - STUCK IN
NEUTRAL

REF: TBILISI 1303

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) Summary/Comment: This is the second cable in a series analyzing opposition protests this spring against the Saakashvili government. This cable focuses on the non-parliamentary opposition which appears to have achieved little if anything positive from four months of street protests. Polling shows that their ratings have dropped precipitously as has their overall political leverage. Having consistently overestimated their support, the non-parliamentary opposition was ill-prepared to cut their political losses, preferring to double down on a poor political hand which ultimately left them with nothing to show despite discontent among the population. From the outset, the non-parliamentary opposition suffered from structural problems. Made up of a loose coalition whose sole unifying principle was a desire to remove President Saakashvili from office, the non-parliamentary opposition had extreme difficulty managing day-to-day tactical decisions and found it impossible to take on strategic challenges. The non-parliamentary opposition had an opportunity to wrest meaningful concession from the GoG and take credit, now it finds itself sidelined with its political capital largely spent. End Summary/Comment.

Protest Lead Up - Everything is Great in the Bubble

¶2. (C) From the outset, the non-parliamentary opposition consistently overestimated its own strength and severely underestimated its weaknesses. Boastful statements from leaders such as David Gamkrelidze predicted that Saakashvili would run like Ceausescu. Other's predicted that Saakashvili might last three days before leaving the country or perhaps try to set up an alternative capital in Batumi. When challenged in private meetings on their lack of support, the consistent refrain was that polls did not reflect the true feelings of the Georgian people. The non-parliamentary opposition seemed to reinforce this theme amongst themselves without any apparent skepticism or self-reflection that the elite circles in which they operate were not a reliable source for overall public opinion. A number of non-parliamentary opposition leaders predicted hundreds of thousands taking to the streets. Obvious contradictions and personality clashes between non-parliamentary leaders were brushed aside as was the lack of a coherent message or plan. In short, the non-parliamentary opposition tried to emulate the tactics of the 2003 Rose Revolution but had little clue as to what actual political opinion was across Georgia before engaging in the protests. Many in the non-parliamentary opposition misjudged dissatisfaction with Saakashvili and the GoG, as support for them; where in fact, many dissatisfied Georgians liked the non-parliamentary opposition even less. The inability to critically self-assess plagued the non-parliamentary opposition in the lead up and throughout the protests.

OK, We're All in the Bus - Who's Driving?

13. (C) The lack of a leader or a coherent mechanism for decision-making plagued the non-parliamentary opposition from the outset. Little or no thought was given before initiating the protests as to who would manage the process or how to proceed in the event that Saakashvili did not immediately resign. Broad, yet transparently artificial, calls of unity of vision and purpose could not be maintained. Apart from protesting to force Saakashvili's resignation, the non-parliamentary opposition had no "plan B." When it became apparent that Saakashvili would not resign, the lack of a functioning decision-making mechanism meant that the non-parliamentary opposition could not agree on any fallback position. All-night meetings turned into long arguments about daily tactics rather than discussions about negotiating strategy. The result of this dysfunctional process was paralysis, meaning the non-parliamentary opposition was unable to agree on anything other than small changes to the status quo of daily protests. The other result was that other actors such as Giorgi Gachechiladze (Utsnobi) could and did operate outside the control of the larger group of non-parliamentary leaders. The most striking example was when Utsnobi decided to take a group of protesters and forcibly enter a police station on May 6 -- an action which resulted in violence. The non-parliamentary opposition realized the lack of a leader was a hindrance to their effectiveness, but their own internal squabbles and competitiveness prevented them from ever picking one. The ultimate result was that despite their claimed unity, the non-parliamentary opposition was often giving confused or contradictory (lowest common denominator) messages to the

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public with leaders often working at cross purposes.

The Tactics

14. (C) The non-parliamentary opposition expected (and indeed many hoped for) a violent crackdown which they believed would produce an outcry and prompt Saakashvili's resignation. The GoG handled the protests like they indicated they would - taking a hands off approach (reftel). This approach clearly frustrated and confused the non-parliamentary opposition who had no contingency plan. As the crowds quickly dwindled, the non-parliamentary opposition increased its use of confrontational tactics like corridors of shame, blocking streets, then installing "cells" in front of Parliament and other government buildings. The public reaction to these tactics was strongly negative. Moreover, the decision-making mechanism or lack thereof meant that the non-parliamentary opposition could not quickly decide on ending certain unpopular tactics. Some cells were removed then replaced, corridors of shame were disbanded then restarted, and blocking roads was used intermittently which led the casual observer to note that the non-parliamentary opposition had little more than pestering the public as an alternative plan, even after many leaders had openly acknowledged its ineffectiveness.

The Message - A Study in Being Tone Deaf

15. (C) The non-parliamentary opposition crafted its message around two ideas: the first being that their struggle was a fight for democracy and democratic values; the second was that they (and indeed all Georgians) were victims of Saakashvili who should be punished for his actions. The second message resonated somewhat among the Georgian population, generally those disaffected by the Rose Revolution, older men, former officials, and Tbilisi elites. However, the non-parliamentary opposition was never able to articulate a positive message or positive agenda for Georgia. This message did not resonate whatsoever with the overwhelming majority of Georgians who neither felt like a victim of a repressive regime, nor wanted to hear a rehash of

recriminations of the past even if they were unsatisfied with the GoG. Secondly, the non-parliamentary opposition could only be described charitably as being imperfect messengers for the democratic values and reform theme they espoused. Even their supporters did not view the protests as being about democratic values but about power. Because of many of the leaders had only tenuous and opportunistic support for democratic principles (a fact not lost on the general public) the message failed even though it had some legitimacy on the merits. The non-parliamentary opposition's core two messages as to why they were protesting and should be in power simply did not speak to the vast majority of Georgians. This disconnect left them little chance to mobilize anybody beyond their hard core supporters who themselves tired of the protests and their non-parliamentary leaders.

Who Is the Audience - Another Disconnect

16. (C) The non-parliamentary opposition focused heavily on briefing diplomats and foreign officials about their views. They rarely spent any time before or during the protests engaging actual Georgians apart from delivering speeches on stage, which largely received broad coverage on national television. The relative utility of the constant diplomatic briefings was questionable. Most diplomats grew tired of the constant repetition of a catalogue of offenses the GoG had committed without being able to articulate a positive agenda or answer basic questions about their plans. Many European diplomats complained about the "taskings" from Salome Zourabichvili and Nino Burjanadze. Non-parliamentary opposition leaders were often spotted sipping tea or coffee in the Marriott before going out to address the crowd from the stage then quickly departing without ever interacting with their "supporters". Various promises to visit the regions remain unfulfilled and the non-parliamentary opposition spent most of its time addressing the same few people with the same message, unable or unwilling to engage the larger public except from their stage.

17. (C) The obvious exception were the Gachechiladze brothers (Levan and Giorgi aka Utsnobi) who actually did have some "street credibility." This street credibility further complicated relationships between the non-parliamentary opposition who feared getting on the wrong side of either Gachechiladze and tolerated their antics because of their perceived ability to entice crowds to protest. Neither Gachechiladze has a reputation of being an astute political tactician and by ceding a leadership role to Giorgi Gachechiladze who was the mastermind of the "cells", the

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non-parliamentary opposition became a hostage to Utsnobi's personal agenda. The Gachechiladze-inspired antics further damaged the non-parliamentary opposition's credibility among those Georgians who wanted serious, issue based change. In short, the majority of non-parliamentary opposition leaders still do not believe in retail politics and the work it takes to build a political movement. The group preferred to rely on old relationships with western diplomats and to subcontract out street level contacts to Levan Gachechiladze and his brother to create a political movement capable of bringing down the GoG - a tactic doomed to failure.

Conclusions

18. (C) It appears that many among the non-parliamentary opposition have learned little from these and previous protests. Rather than being strategic about protests and waiting until the fall when economic indicators were likely to be worse as a more politically mature group would, the impatient non-parliamentary opposition started protests in April. Now it appears their opportunity to take political advantage of economic discontent has been significantly diminished. When autumn arrives, the non-parliamentary opposition are in danger of actually being blamed by a large

portion of Georgians for their economic woes due to the protests; rightly or wrongly a case the GoG has been making since the first weeks of the protests. The non-parliamentary opposition has proven again that while it uses the language of democracy and democratic reform in its speeches, polls have shown Georgians believe that their ultimate goal is simply to take the reins of power. Protests will continue but unlike in the past, the larger Georgian public seems to have moved on from the zero sum game of power politics.

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